

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**ALICE, OR THE
MYSTERIES — BOOK
05**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Alice, or the Mysteries — Book 05

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BOOK V

*"FOOLS blind to truth; nor know their erring soul
How much the half is better than the whole."*

—*HESIOD: Op. et Dies, 40.*

CHAPTER I

*Do as the Heavens have done; forget your evil;
With them, forgive yourself.*

—*The Winter's Tale.*

*. . . The sweet'st companion that e'er man
Bred his hopes out of.*

—*Ibid.*

THE curate of Brook-Green was sitting outside his door. The vicarage which he inhabited was a straggling, irregular, but picturesque building,—humble enough to suit the means of the curate, yet large enough to accommodate the vicar. It had been built in an age when the *indigentes et pauperes* for whom universities were founded supplied, more than they do now, the fountains of the Christian ministry, when pastor and flock were more on an equality.

From under a rude and arched porch, with an oaken settle on either side for the poor visitor, the door opened at once upon the old-fashioned parlour,—a homely but pleasant room, with one wide but low cottage casement, beneath which stood the dark shining table that supported the large Bible in its green baize cover; the Concordance, and the last Sunday's sermon, in its jetty case. There by the fireplace stood the bachelor's round elbow-chair, with a needlework cushion at the back; a walnut-tree bureau, another table or two, half a dozen plain chairs, constituted the rest of the furniture, saving some two or three hundred volumes, ranged in neat shelves on the clean wainscoted walls. There was another room, to which you ascended by two steps, communicating with this parlour, smaller but finer, and inhabited only on festive days, when Lady Vargrave, or some other quiet neighbour, came to drink tea with the good curate.

An old housekeeper and her grandson—a young fellow of about two and twenty, who tended the garden, milked the cow, and did in fact what he was wanted to do—composed the establishment of the humble minister.

We have digressed from Mr. Aubrey himself.

The curate was seated, then, one fine summer morning, on a bench at the left of his porch, screened from the sun by the cool boughs of a chestnut-tree, the shadow of which half covered the little lawn that separated the precincts of the house from those of silent Death and everlasting Hope;

above the irregular and moss-grown paling rose the village church; and, through openings in the trees, beyond the burial-ground, partially gleamed the white walls of Lady Vargrave's cottage, and were seen at a distance the sails on the—

"Mighty waters, rolling evermore."

The old man was calmly enjoying the beauty of the morning, the freshness of the air, the warmth of the dancing beam, and not least, perhaps, his own peaceful thoughts,—the spontaneous children of a contemplative spirit and a quiet conscience. His was the age when we most sensitively enjoy the mere sense of existence,—when the face of Nature and a passive conviction of the benevolence of our Great Father suffice to create a serene and ineffable happiness, which rarely visits us till we have done with the passions; till memories, if more alive than heretofore, are yet mellowed in the hues of time, and Faith softens into harmony all their asperities and harshness; till nothing within us remains to cast a shadow over the things without; and on the verge of life, the Angels are nearer to us than of yore. There is an old age which has more youth of heart than youth itself!

As the old man thus sat, the little gate through which, on Sabbath days, he was wont to pass from the humble mansion to the house of God noiselessly opened, and Lady Vargrave appeared.

The curate rose when he perceived her; and the lady's fair features were lighted up with a gentle pleasure, as she pressed his hand and returned his salutation.

There was a peculiarity in Lady Vargrave's countenance which I have rarely seen in others. Her smile, which was singularly expressive, came less from the lip than from the eyes; it was almost as if the brow smiled; it was as the sudden and momentary vanishing of a light but melancholy cloud that usually rested upon the features, placid as they were.

They sat down on the rustic bench, and the sea-breeze wantoned amongst the quivering leaves of the chestnut-tree that overhung their seat.

"I have come, as usual, to consult my kind friend," said Lady Vargrave; "and, as usual also, it is about our absent Evelyn."

"Have you heard again from her, this morning?"

"Yes; and her letter increases the anxiety which your observation, so much deeper than mine, first awakened."

"Does she then write much of Lord Vargrave?"

"Not a great deal; but the little she does say, betrays how much she shrinks from the union my poor husband desired: more, indeed, than ever! But this is not all, nor the worst; for you know that the late lord had provided against that probability—he loved her so tenderly, his ambition for her only came from his affection; and the letter he left behind him pardons and releases her, if she revolts from the choice he himself preferred."

"Lord Vargrave is, perhaps, a generous, he certainly seems a candid, man, and he must be sensible that his uncle has already done all that justice required."

"I think so. But this, as I said, is not all; I have brought the letter to show you. It seems to me as you apprehended. This Mr. Maltravers has wound himself about her thoughts more than she herself imagines; you see how she dwells on all that concerns him, and how, after checking herself, she returns again and again to the same subject."

The curate put on his spectacles, and took the letter. It was a strange thing, that old gray-haired minister evincing such grave interest in the secrets of that young heart! But they who would take charge of the soul must never be too wise to regard the heart!

Lady Vargrave looked over his shoulder as he bent down to read, and at times placed her finger on such passages as she wished him to note. The old curate nodded as she did so; but neither spoke till the letter was concluded.

The curate then folded up the epistle, took off his spectacles, hemmed, and looked grave.

"Well," said Lady Vargrave, anxiously, "well?"

"My dear friend, the letter requires consideration. In the first place, it is clear to me that, in spite of Lord Vargrave's presence at the rectory, his lordship so manages matters that the poor child is unable of herself to bring that matter to a conclusion. And, indeed, to a mind so sensitively delicate and honourable, it is no easy task."

"Shall I write to Lord Vargrave?"

"Let us think of it. In the meanwhile, this Mr. Maltravers—"

"Ah, this Mr. Maltravers!"

"The child shows us more of her heart than she thinks of; and yet I myself am puzzled. If you observe, she has only once or twice spoken of the Colonel Legard whom she has made acquaintance with; while she treats at length of Mr. Maltravers, and confesses the effect he has produced on her mind. Yet, do you know, I more dread the caution respecting the first than all the candour that betrays the influence of the last? There is a great difference between first fancy and first love."

"Is there?" said the lady, abstractedly.

"Again, neither of us is acquainted with this singular man,—I mean Maltravers; his character, temper, and principles, of all of which Evelyn is too young, too guileless, to judge for herself. One thing, however, in her letter speaks in his favour."

"What is that?"

"He absents himself from her. This, if he has discovered her secret, or if he himself is sensible of too great a charm in her presence, would be the natural course that an honourable and a strong mind would pursue."

"What!—if he love her?"

"Yes; while he believes her hand is engaged to another."

"True! What shall be done—if Evelyn should love, and love in vain? Ah, it is the misery of a whole existence!"

"Perhaps she had better return to us," said Mr. Aubrey; "and yet, if already it be too late, and her affections are engaged, we should still remain in ignorance respecting the motives and mind of the object of her attachment; and he, too, might not know the true nature of the obstacle connected with Lord Vargrave's claims."

"Shall I, then, go to her? You know how I shrink from strangers; how I fear curiosity, doubts, and questions; how [and Lady Vargrave's voice faltered]—how unfitted I am for—for—" she stopped short, and a faint blush overspread her cheeks.

The curate understood her, and was moved.

"Dear friend," said he, "will you intrust this charge to myself? You know how Evelyn is endeared to me by certain recollections! Perhaps, better than you, I may be enabled silently to examine if this man be worthy of her, and one who could secure her happiness; perhaps, better than you I may ascertain the exact nature of her own feelings towards him; perhaps, too, better than you I may effect an understanding with Lord Vargrave."

"You are always my kindest friend," said the lady, with emotion; "how much I already owe you! what hopes beyond the grave! what—"

"Hush!" interrupted the curate, gently; "your own good heart and pure intentions have worked out your own atonement—may I hope also your own content? Let us return to our Evelyn. Poor child! how unlike this despondent letter to her gay light spirits when with us! We acted for the best; yet perhaps we did wrong to yield her up to strangers. And this Maltravers—with her enthusiasm and quick susceptibilities to genius, she was half prepared to imagine him all she depicts him to be. He must have a spell in his works that I have not discovered, for at times it seems to operate even on you."

"Because," said Lady Vargrave, "they remind me of *his* conversation, *his* habits of thought. If like *him* in other things, Evelyn may indeed be happy!"

"And if," said the curate, curiously,— "if now that you are free, you were ever to meet with him again, and his memory had been as faithful as yours; and if he offered the sole atonement in

his power, for all that his early error cost you; if such a chance should happen in the vicissitudes of life, you would—"

The curate stopped short; for he was struck by the exceeding paleness of his friend's cheek, and the tremor of her delicate frame.

"If that were to happen," said she, in a very low voice; "if we were to meet again, and if he were—as you and Mrs. Leslie seem to think—poor, and, like myself, humbly born, if my fortune could assist him, if my love could still—changed, altered as I am—ah! do not talk of it—I cannot bear the thought of happiness! And yet, if before I die I *could* but see him again!" She clasped her hands fervently as she spoke, and the blush that overspread her face threw over it so much of bloom and freshness, that even Evelyn, at that moment, would scarcely have seemed more young. "Enough!" she added, after a little while, as the glow died away. "It is but a foolish hope; all earthly love is buried; and my heart is there!"—she pointed to the heavens, and both were silent.

CHAPTER II

*QUIBUS otio vel magnifice, vel molliter, vivere copia era incerta pro certis malebant.*¹—SALLUST.

LORD RABY—one of the wealthiest and most splendid noblemen in England—was prouder, perhaps, of his provincial distinctions than the eminence of his rank or the fashion of his wife. The magnificent chateaux, the immense estates, of our English peers tend to preserve to us in spite of the freedom, bustle, and commercial grandeur of our people more of the Norman attributes of aristocracy than can be found in other countries. In his county, the great noble is a petty prince; his house is a court; his possessions and munificence are a boast to every proprietor in his district. They are as fond of talking of *the earl's* or *the duke's* movements and entertainments, as Dangeau was of the gossip of the Tuileries and Versailles.

Lord Raby, while affecting, as lieutenant of the county, to make no political distinctions between squire and squire—hospitable and affable to all—still, by that very absence of exclusiveness, gave a tone to the politics of the whole county; and converted many who had once thought differently on the respective virtues of Whigs and Tories. A great man never loses so much as when he exhibits intolerance, or parades the right of persecution.

"My tenants shall vote exactly as they please," said Lord Raby; and he was never known to have a tenant vote against his wishes! Keeping a vigilant eye on all the interests, and conciliating all the proprietors, in the county, he not only never lost a friend, but he kept together a body of partisans that constantly added to its numbers.

Sir John Merton's colleague, a young Lord Nelthorpe, who could not speak three sentences if you took away his hat, and who, constant at Almack's, was not only inaudible but invisible in parliament, had no chance of being re-elected. Lord Nelthorpe's father, the Earl of Mainwaring, was a new peer; and, next to Lord Raby, the richest nobleman in the county. Now, though they were much of the same politics, Lord Raby hated Lord Mainwaring. They were too near each other,—they clashed; they had the jealousy of rival princes!

Lord Raby was delighted at the notion of getting rid of Lord Nelthorpe,—it would be so sensible a blow to the Mainwaring interest. The party had been looking out for a new candidate, and Maltravers had been much talked of. It is true that, when in parliament some years before, the politics of Maltravers had differed from those of Lord Raby and his set. But Maltravers had of late taken no share in politics, had uttered no political opinions, was intimate with the electioneering Mertons, was supposed to be a discontented man,—and politicians believe in no discontent that is not political. Whispers were afloat that Maltravers had grown wise, and changed his views: some remarks of his, more theoretical than practical, were quoted in favour of this notion. Parties, too, had much changed since Maltravers had appeared on the busy scene,—new questions had arisen, and the old ones had died off.

Lord Raby and his party thought that, if Maltravers could be secured to them, no one would better suit their purpose. Political faction loves converts better even than consistent adherents. A man's rise in life generally dates from a well-timed *rat*. His high reputation, his provincial rank as the representative of the oldest commoner's family in the county, his age, which combined the energy of one period with the experience of another,—all united to accord Maltravers a preference over richer men. Lord Raby had been pointedly courteous and flattering to the master of Burleigh; and he now contrived it so, that the brilliant entertainment he was about to give might appear in compliment to

¹ "They who had the means to live at ease, either in splendour or in luxury, preferred the uncertainty of change to their natural security."

a distinguished neighbour, returned to fix his residence on his patrimonial property, while in reality it might serve an electioneering purpose,—serve to introduce Maltravers to the county, as if under his lordship's own wing, and minister to political uses that went beyond the mere representation of the county.

Lord Vargrave had, during his stay at Merton Rectory, paid several visits to Knaresdean, and held many private conversations with the marquess: the result of these conversations was a close union of schemes and interests between the two noblemen. Dissatisfied with the political conduct of government, Lord Raby was also dissatisfied that, from various party reasons, a nobleman beneath himself in rank, and as he thought in influence, had obtained a preference in a recent vacancy among the Knights of the Garter. And if Vargrave had a talent in the world it was in discovering the weak points of men whom he sought to gain, and making the vanities of others conduce to his own ambition.

The festivities of Knaresdean gave occasion to Lord Raby to unite at his house the more prominent of those who thought and acted in concert with Lord Vargrave; and in this secret senate the operations for the following session were to be seriously discussed and gravely determined.

On the day which was to be concluded with the ball at Knaresdean, Lord Vargrave went before the rest of the Merton party, for he was engaged to dine with the marquess.

On arriving at Knaresdean, Lumley found Lord Saxingham and some other politicians, who had arrived the preceding day, closeted with Lord Raby; and Vargrave, who shone to yet greater advantage in the diplomacy of party management than in the arena of parliament, brought penetration, energy, and decision to timid and fluctuating counsels. Lord Vargrave lingered in the room after the first bell had summoned the other guests to depart.

"My dear lord," said he then, "though no one would be more glad than myself to secure Maltravers to our side, I very much doubt whether you will succeed in doing so. On the one hand, he appears altogether disgusted with politics and parliament; and on the other hand, I fancy that reports of his change of opinions are, if not wholly unfounded, very unduly coloured. Moreover, to do him justice, I think that he is not one to be blinded and flattered into the pale of a party; and your bird will fly away after you have wasted a bucketful of salt on his tail."

"Very possibly," said Lord Raby, laughing,—"you know him better than I do. But there are many purposes to serve in this matter,—purposes too provincial to interest you. In the first place, we shall humble the Nelthorpe interest, merely by showing that we *do* think of a new member; secondly, we shall get up a manifestation of feeling that would be impossible, unless we were provided with a centre of attraction; thirdly, we shall rouse a certain emulation among other county gentlemen, and if Maltravers decline, we shall have many applicants; and fourthly, suppose Maltravers has not changed his opinions, we shall make him suspected by the party he really does belong to, and which would be somewhat formidable if he were to head them. In fact, these are mere county tactics that you can't be expected to understand."

"I see you are quite right: meanwhile you will at least have an opportunity (though I say it, who should not say it) to present to the county one of the prettiest young ladies that ever graced the halls of Knaresdean."

"Ah, Miss Cameron! I have heard much of her beauty: you are a lucky fellow, Vargrave! By the by, are we to say anything of the engagement?"

"Why, indeed, my dear lord, it is now so publicly known, that it would be false delicacy to affect concealment."

"Very well; I understand."

"How long I have detained you—a thousand pardons!—I have but just time to dress. In four or five months I must remember to leave you a longer time for your toilet."

"Me—how?"

"Oh, the Duke of —— can't live long; and I always observe that when a handsome man has the Garter, he takes a long time pulling up his stockings."

"Ha, ha! you are so droll, Vargrave."

"Ha, ha! I must be off."

"The more publicity is given to this arrangement, the more difficult for Evelyn to shy at the leap," muttered Vargrave to himself as he closed the door. "Thus do I make all things useful to myself!"

The dinner party were assembled in the great drawing-room, when Maltravers and Cleveland, also invited guests to the banquet, were announced. Lord Raby received the former with marked *empressement*; and the stately marchioness honoured him with her most gracious smile. Formal presentations to the rest of the guests were interchanged; and it was not till the circle was fully gone through that Maltravers perceived, seated by himself in a corner, to which he had shrunk on the entrance of Maltravers, a gray-haired solitary man,—it was Lord Saxingham! The last time they had met was in the death-chamber of Florence; and the old man forgot for the moment the anticipated dukedom, and the dreamed-of premiership, and his heart flew back to the grave of his only child! They saluted each other, and shook hands in silence. And Vargrave—whose eye was on them—Vargrave, whose arts had made that old man childless, felt not a pang of remorse! Living ever in the future, Vargrave almost seemed to have lost his memory. He knew not what regret was. It is a condition of life with men thoroughly worldly that they never look behind!

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